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Did Reagan really lose?

Nervous Nellies pick a fall guy

Forget Communist Nicaragua's 120,000-man army and militia, backed by more than 3,000 Cuban military advisers. Forget the \$600 million the Soviets have pumped into Communist Nicaragua to make its armed forces almost equal the size of those of Mexico, a country 15 times as large with 25 times the population. And forget all those Soviets, East Germans, Bulgarians, North Koreans, and Palestine Liberation Organization and Red Brigade terrorists who are stirring up trouble in Communist Nicaragua.

Forget all this. And let's concentrate on the *real* focus of evil in the world: White House Communications Director Pat Buchanan. Now here's a *real* threat, at least to some.

On the "NBC Nightly News" the night President Reagan's \$100 million aid package for the Nicaraguan freedom fighters was defeated in the House 222 to 210, we were told that it was not the so-called contras who would be running for the hills now, but rather Mr. Buchanan who should be running for the hills. Why? Because "it was Buchanan who seemed to question the patriotism of contra aid opponents." And this supposedly angered many members of the House.

What was being alluded to here was a March 5, 1986, column by Mr. Buchanan in *The Washington Post* in which he asked the House "Whose side are you on?" And he, accurately, said that the contra aid vote would reveal whether the Democrats stood with President Reagan and the freedom fighters — "or Daniel Ortega and the Communists."

NBC showed us a smirking Rep.

Michael Barnes, Democrat of Maryland, who was calling Mr. Buchanan a secret weapon in the anti-contra campaign and publicly thanking him for his hard-line rhetoric. And a grim-faced Rep. Thomas Foley, Democrat of Washington, was shown accusing Mr. Buchanan of having "degraded" the debate and of being "ineffective," which, in politics, are two "very serious charges."

On the "CBS Evening News," when asked by Dan Rather why President Reagan's statement regarding the House vote was "so emotional," reporter Bill Plante said this was to encourage the contras and warn the Sandinistas. And said Mr. Plante, who once defended the "right" of the press to be wrong, this statement was written by Pat Buchanan, whose tone some White House staffers think was "needlessly harsh and confrontational at a time when they were trying to win a legislative battle."

But is this true? Was Mr. Buchanan's tone — which was the same as President Reagan's (and this is what really galls the critics) — ineffective? Well, bottom-line-wise, the president lost — this time. But when viewed in context, something the national media rarely does concerning anything, and contrasted with previous votes, President Reagan did a lot better than before. This kind of perspective, however, was totally lacking in any network TV analysis I saw.

On Aug. 2, 1984, the House passed H.R. 5399, a bill to make authorizations in Fiscal 1985 for the CIA and other intelligence agencies and to prohibit any form of U.S. aid to military or paramilitary groups in Nicaragua. This bill was passed by a vote of 294 to 118, with only 22 Democrats favoring the president's position, which was to give this aid. Last week, Mr. Reagan's aid for the contras proposal got 210 votes, an increase of 92 votes. And last week, 24 more House Democrats voted with the president than voted for his contra aid in 1984.

And on April 23, 1985, the House rejected by a vote of 248 to 180 H.J. Resolution 239, which sought approval for the release of \$14 million (much less than the \$70 million sought last week) in Fiscal 1985 for supporting military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua. Forty Democrats voted with Mr. Reagan on H.J. Resolution 239.

Thus, this year, with the administration pursuing the allegedly "de-

grading" and "ineffective" hard line of Pat Buchanan, Mr. Reagan did better, overall and among Democrats in the House, than he did on these two previous votes.

And if ever there was an example of hypocrisy, of a double-standard, it's all the wailing and gnashing of teeth about Mr. Buchanan's tough talk. Top Sandinista Communist thug Daniel Ortega has repeatedly said, in effect, that Mr. Reagan is nuts, that he's taken leave of his senses. House Speaker "Tip" O'Neill has said, in so many words, that Mr. Reagan is a warmonger whose policy is "bringing American boys to their death" just to "prove a point" with the Soviets.

Mr. O'Neill has accused the president of sinking to "the depths of gunboat diplomacy" and wanting to declare war against "one of the smallest, poorest nations in the hemisphere." He ignores, of course, the fact that Communist Nicaragua has, proportionately, one of the most potent military war machines in the hemisphere.

And Sen. James Sasser, Democrat of Tennessee, has borne false witness against the president by saying that what he proposes is "a wider war in Nicaragua, now" (emphasis his).

So, what about *this* kind of talk? What about *this* rhetorical recklessness? You know the answer. There hasn't been a peep of criticism about *this* verbal overkill. Not a peep. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Because, you see, among the Nervous Nellies on the White House staff and in our national media, there is only one ogre, only one person whose utterances have been beyond the pale, and his name is Pat Buchanan.

And forget Michael Barnes. He's as dishonest as they come. On a recent Phil Donahue show, he stated flatly that he had always supported Mr. Reagan's liberation of Grenada. To which Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams said no way, that Mr. Barnes had originally opposed the Grenada liberation and then changed his mind on it. No, said Mr. Barnes, he "never opposed" what the president did in Grenada.

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But this is not true. The Nov. 4, 1983, *Montgomery Journal* quotes Mr. Barnes as saying of the Grenada operation that "when you have to resort to force . . . what that represents is a failure of policy." (I wonder if he feels this way about World War II?) And immediately following the Grenada liberation, he complained that the Congress wasn't "adequately consulted." Mr. Barnes subsequently went to Grenada, post-liberation, and wrote an op-ed piece for *The Washington Post* headlined "The Invasion Was Right."

Well, the attempt to help the Nicaraguan freedom fighters is also right, Mr. Barnes. And President Reagan *will* get his \$100 million in aid. Whether this is too little too late is another question, however, and one I shall examine in my next column.